

NOEL WEARY

His duty to this day: remember

■ Noel Weary of Forest Hills was a crew member of the USS *Oklahoma* 62 years ago in Pearl Harbor.

By LOGAN D. MABE
Times Staff Writer

time ago," said Weary, 82, who lives in the Forest Hills area of North Tampa, not far from where he grew up.

But everything else from that time, all the madness of that day, is as sharp and vivid and clear as shattered crystal.

"You don't ever forget," Weary said.

The crew of the *Oklahoma* had been cruising the Pacific for six months. They were due for a break.

So the *Oklahoma* and most of the rest of the Pacific fleet was ordered to Pearl Harbor for some rest and recuperation.

The officers got to go ashore Saturday night. Weary, a machinist mate, and the rest of the enlisted men were to get their chance that fatal Sunday.

Weary was working one of the liberty boats that morning, ferrying breakfast supplies for the officers.

"When we got back, General Quarters sounded, and this officer fired a shot off into the air to get people's attention," Weary recalled. "He said, 'This is no s---!'"

Weary did what he'd been trained to do: He manned his battle station, the cook's quarters on the second deck just above the engine room. Then he did the one thing he'd been trained to do in an attack: He closed an armor-plated door meant to protect his mates from bombs.

"We took a torpedo, and I'd just closed this armor-plated hatch on all my buddies. They didn't make it," Weary said of the crew that went down with the ship. "I just closed that hatch and secured myself in a bunk with mattresses, which we were trained to do. We got this hit underneath that knocked me out of the bunk, and oil rushed in and the ladder going up to the main deck was bent like a dog leg. I got up there and the ship was moving to the side, rolling over."

A chief bosun's mate told Weary to abandon ship. Weary knew better. Those kinds of orders only came through the JV phones, a

TAMPA — A single red flower, dried now for decades, separates the pages of Noel Weary's beloved photo album. The black-and-white pictures from 60 years ago frame Weary in his crisp Navy uniform, looking young, handsome and fit for a fight.

On another page is a photo of Weary with his USS *Oklahoma* wrestling team, bare chests and flat-top crew cuts. Weary was the 165-pound champion.

"You can't find him, I bet," Weary's wife Dorothy, said, chuckling. "He's changed a little bit since then."

Weary's life changed awfully, in a baptism of blood and engine oil Dec. 7, 1941, when Japanese fighter pilots attacked his battleship at Pearl Harbor with torpedoes and machine gun fire.

The flower is a mystery to Weary's mind. "It was from something that happened a long

time ago," he said. "I put me in charge of the boat to start hauling survivors." Weary said.

The *Oklahoma* carried 1,353 officers and crew members that day. Twenty officers and 395 enlisted men were either killed or missing. Thirty-two crew members were rescued days later, having survived in an air pocket in the ship's hull until an escape hatch was cut.

Weary's mother had to wait three months to hear whether her son was one of those casualties. Weary still has a weathered newspaper clipping: a photo of his mother gazing at a photo of him.

Just 20 years old at the time of the attack, Weary had enlisted in the Navy to seek his fortune.

"In this day and time, people don't remember what it was like in the '30s and '40s," Weary said. "That was the Depression, man, and you needed to do something. I figured that we were going to war, the way everything looked. So I figured if I was going to be in the service, I didn't want to be out there in the damned mud like the soldiers. I didn't want to be no soldier."

After the Pearl Harbor attack, Weary worked for 18 months at an ammunition depot in Hawaii before he moved to a Navy shipyard where he helped repair ships.

Later, Weary served as chief engineer on a troop ship, delivering grunts to Iwo Jima.

"There was a lot of fellows lost their lives there," Weary said.

Weary left the service with a disability discharge after five years of his six-year hitch. He came back to Tampa, where he worked in a brewery and a dry cleaner before he joined the Hillsborough County Sheriff's Office as a deputy.

He did that for 31 years. That's where he met Dorothy, who worked in the warrants division. They had a boy and a girl.